

travel



Valley deep, MOUNTAIN HIGH

Under the looming presence of the Slanghoek mountains, Opstal Estate produces some of the country's finest wines. Now, you can pack your bag and book a night at one of their swanky cottages, for a taste of farm life that'll leave you wanting more by **HEATHER TOEY**

I sink back into the warm water of the wood-fired hot tub, glass of wine in hand. Far below, down in the depths of the valley, the farm is a hive of activity. Tractors weave through the vines, tracing a path in the shadow of the looming Slanghoek mountain range. We can just about hear the voices of the farmworkers, chatting to each other over the roar of the tractor as they finish off another day of the harvest. It's only a few weeks of the year, but all the blood, sweat, tears and grapes from the past 12 months leads up to this point. Feeling remarkably relaxed, despite the busyness unfolding below us, it's hard to think of a better way to unwind.

We plotted a stay at Opstal as part of our honeymoon; a COVID-19-friendly, local road trip to private cabins that had one thing in common: a wood-burning hot tub. It's equal parts relaxing, romantic and satisfying for my husband's inner pyromaniac. The previous stops on our trip had been beautiful and restorative, but by the time we got to Opstal, we'd run out of wood, CocoPops and wine (how did I let that happen?), and were yearning for the level of sophistication that the family-run business could offer.

Situated just one hour from Cape Town, Opstal sits in the breathtaking Slanghoek Valley near Rawsonville and has been family-owned since 1847 – the current operational duo of brothers Zak

and Attie Louw are seventh generation descendants on JC 'Lang Jan' Rossouw, the very first owner of 'De Opstal bij de Fonteine'. With the diversity of terroir (ranging from the Badsberg mountains in the east to the Slanghoek mountains in the west), the duo is crafting their fine wines (and creating new recipes, like the Syrah/Viognier Blush I'm drinking) under the guidance of their father, Stanley Louw.

Opstal Estate's rich history started when JC Rossouw acquired the farm, then called De Opstal bij de Fonteine. Over a century later, fourth generation Carl Everson decided to continue the family legacy and instead of joining the local co-operative winery like many other producers did, he kept Opstal going on their own way. Good thing –



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today, Opstal has a wide range of quality estate wines under three different labels: The fun, easy drinking, pocket-friendly Sixpence Range; the classical, food-friendly Estate Range; and the premium Heritage Range, with the multiple 5-star Platter award-winning Carl Everson Chenin blanc as the cream of the crop. 'One thing I've learnt in the years growing up and working in the wine industry,' Attie had told us earlier over a tasting in the beautiful restaurant, 'is that wine as a product should not be taken too seriously. I want to make the wine-drinking experience relaxed and enjoyable.' We'd been on a tour of the cellar, and watched tonnes and tonnes

of freshly picked grapes get funnelled down into a fancy machine that whips off the skins. We'd then settled into a table on the verandah for lunch and a bottle of their famous Chenin. Part of Opstal's undeniable charm is their multifaceted operation. While the winemaking always continues in the background, there is also Opstal Eat (restaurant and tasting room), Opstal Weddings and Opstal Stay (more on that later).

The menu, prepared by in-house chef PJ Lombard, looked far too tempting (especially after five days of braai meat and gin only), and we struggled not to order everything. Eventually, we went with a parma ham, fig and rocket pizza

THE STORY BEHIND THE WINES: CARL EVERSON & SIXPENCE

Carl Everson was the visionary who embraced the wine industry and saw a future in it for himself and his family. In his lifetime, he experienced the changeover from horse driven to machine-driven winemaking, and from wine leaving the farm in barrels on a horse cart to the time of 34 ton trucks.

Carl Everson used to make sherry in his day. He married one of Lang Jan's daughters, Margaretha. He was seldom seen without his hat and trademark bunch of keys in his hand. He loved drinking very hot, strong coffee from his saucer. He was known as a jovial, cheerful person who loved to joke around, but stood firm in his values. To honour his memory today, the award-winning Opstal signature Chenin blanc is named after Carl.

As for Sixpence – that was the nickname given to shepherd Daniel Smiles, who looked after the flock of sheep that roamed the grounds in the '50s and '60s. Over time, the farm increased the amount of land under vine and stopped farming sheep. Vineyards were planted on what had been grazing land for Sixpence's sheep, and were quickly named Sixpence's Vineyards after that.

The range of wine, Sixpence, are made from grapes from this section of the farm – and the range is not only a tribute to Sixpence himself, but to all the legends who worked on the farm over the years.

chic cottages were all designed by mom of the farm, Ria Louw, and Zak's wife, Karmin (who is a school teacher and even got the kids involved in choosing some of the artwork and materials). Along with the sophisticated yet homey feel of the cottages, and all the creature comforts you could need (such as wood, towels, toiletries, crockery, butter, milk), your arrival is welcomed with a loaf of freshly baked farm bread, hanepoot jam and a bottle of wine.

But for me, wallowing in the hot and slowly sipping on my blush, the real appeal of the cottages is how they can be enjoyed no matter the weather. Get the fires roaring (in the hot tub and in the beautifully appointed fireplace inside) during winter, or turn your hot tub into a mini swimming pool and light the braai in summer – either way, the beauty of the valley will be there to be enjoyed.

(with a surprising cream cheese base), and a Barber Platter, loaded with chilli poppers, three-cheese quesadillas, springrolls, samosas and chicken strips. Generous, delicious and something I wish I could order on Mr D every Friday night. While we hoovered it down, the farm buzz continued around us – you're always surrounded by some sort of farm activity, which really lends to the beauty and serenity of Opstal. There's nothing manufactured, and watching the tractors load ruby-red grapes not only makes you feel grounded, but honoured to be part of the activity, like we were privately invited by the Louws to witness a slice of 2021 harvest season.

And feeling part of the family doesn't stop there. The five modern, supremely

We plotted a stay at Opstal as part of our honeymoon; a COVID-19-friendly, local road trip to private cabins with wood-burning hot tubs

As we watch the tractors plod home, and the sun dips behind the Slanghoek mountains, the fire cracks and pops in its steel box; the steam whips off the surface of the icy blue water. We put in an order for dinner (how we have even a scrap of an appetite is beyond me) – the kitchen closes at 3:30 pm, so if you get your order in time, you can pop down to collect your gourmet fare and save it for later. Who should cook on their honeymoon? We go for a pesto and wild mushroom penne, with a creamy bechamel sauce and Parmesan shavings, as well as the grilled steak sandwich, and spent a glorious evening moving between the sizzling tub, the impossible puzzle on the dining room table, and the fire in the lounge.

The next morning, we packed up reluctantly and moseyed down to the restaurant for a breakfast of poached eggs, bacon-covered waffles, whipped cream cheese, farm bread and more of that delicious hanepoot jam.

To say there's no better way to unwind is selling Opstal short. It's not just about unwinding. Immersing yourself in the farm culture and the comings and the goings is a refreshing reminder of a life free from all those pesky modern-world distractions. With restored energy and a desire to never eat again, we hit the road. But not without stopping at the tasting room for a case of the Blush for the road...

The Details

Opstal Estate is located on Slanghoek Road, near Rawsonville. It's a one-hour drive out on the N1 from Cape Town.

There are five cottages: Carl Everson, The Barber, Lang Jan, Nellie's Needle and Lady Ansie. Carl Everson and The Barber are the largest, sleeping four adults or two adults and two kids, while the rest of the cottages sleep two. Rates start from R1 650 per night.

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